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The attack on Mr. Hoover

Washington — The continuing attack on J. Edgar Hoover has a deeper significance, in my own view, than appears on the surface. Underlying the whole assault upon the aging autocrat of the FBI is a serious failure, at high levels, to accept some hard realities of the world we live in.

It is a truism that no man is indispensable, and the truism applies to Mr. Hoover as it applies to everyone else. It is quite possible — even probable — that the bureau would benefit from the fresh viewpoint and revised procedures that a successor might bring to the director's office. Bureaucracies pick up barnacles like ships; they ought to have their hulls cleaned now and then.

Provided the ingredients

Yet it is regrettable that this controversy should have focused so intently upon the age, the character and the personality of Mr. Hoover himself. Granted, in recent months the director has not helped his own case, and because the bureau is his own lengthened shadow, he has not helped the FBI greatly either.

Half a dozen incidents have contributed to a public impression of a vain and thin-skinned tyrant, petulant and vindictive; and if this impression has been happily overblown by some of the

press and a gaggle of liberal politicians, Mr. Hoover himself has provided the ingredients for his critics to work with:

All this is a pity, for the hostility to J. Edgar Hoover rests upon attitudes that have little to do with the testiness of an old man. The complaint against Mr. Hoover, at bottom, is that he has done those tough and distasteful things that have to be done by an effective FBI in the world we live in. He has not flinched from the dark side of police work. His sin is to make comfortable men uncomfortable.

Earth Day surveillance

By way of example: Senator Edmund S. Muskie, in demanding the director's resignation, was aghast to discover that the FBI had assigned agents to certain Earth Day rallies in April of 1970. In a speech to the Senate on April 14, Muskie was filled with rhetorical anguish:

"If there was widespread surveillance of Earth Day last year, is there any political activity in the country which the FBI doesn't consider a legitimate subject for watching? If anti-pollution rallies are a subject of intelligence concern, is anything immune? Is there any citizen involved in politics who is not a potential subject for an FBI dossier?"

Well, one sighs; and one contemplates the prospect that Senator Muskie may sweep into the White House next year, trailing such clouds of gauzy stuff around him; and one gives thanks, unexpectedly, for the leathery sinews of a Lyndon Johnson and the fortitude of a Richard Nixon.

Why the FBI was there

The gentleman from Maine is a good man. He shrinks from evils. His instinctive assumption is that all those who attend anti-pollution rallies are as pure as the springs of Moosehead Lake.

The FBI knows better. Among those attending the Earth Day programs of 1970 were a number of radical activists, entirely capable of inciting riots and triggering violence. At a very minimum, good police work demands that these dangerous men — and women — be kept under close surveillance.

But surveillance is a dirty word. The very thought is abhorrent to the ideals of a free society. And the sin of J. Edgar Hoover, again, is that he is capable of thing abhorrent thoughts — not merely of thinking them, but of acting on them also. The lamentable truth is that men are indeed less than angels, and some men are a great deal less than angels. Ours is not exclusively a world of kindly senators and earnest ecologists; it is also a world of ruthless terrorists.

Well, it is said, Senator Muskie knows that. Everyone knows that. But knowledge lies in the subconscious in layers of perception. The task of an FBI director — any FBI director — is to know crime, to fight it as a general wages war, and to deploy his own troops and weapons to maximum advantage. This has been the genius of J. Edgar Hoover. When at last he steps down, we ought to pray for a successor equally capable of thinking those abhorrent thoughts that gentle senators abhor.